

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: A Foundational Figure in Hindu Cultural and Political Consciousness

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Abstract: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, often hailed as Sahitya Samrat, emerged as a pivotal architect of modern Indian nationalism by fusing Hindu cultural revivalism with anti-colonial political consciousness. Through seminal works like *Anandamath* (1882) and the hymn “Bande Mataram,” he personified the nation as a Hindu Mother Goddess (Bharat Mata), advocated Anushilan (disciplined self-culture), and reinterpreted Hindu dharma as a call to action. This article examines how Bankim laid the ideological foundations for a Hindu-inflected cultural nationalism that influenced the Indian freedom struggle and continues to resonate in contemporary debates on identity, secularism, and Hindutva.

Keywords: Hindu Nationalism, Revivalism, Bande Mataram, Bankim Chandra.

Life and Works

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay or Chatterji (1838-1894) is an Indian author who is credited with establishing prose as a literary vehicle for the Bengali language. He was born to his father Jadav Chandra on June 26, in 1838, at his native place of Kanthalpara. His upbringing and family background played a vital role in the trajectory of his life. His religious and spiritual convictions were rooted in those early experiences. His ancestral deity was Shri Radhavallabh, and Bankim remained a staunch Vaishnava and devotee of Shri Krishna till his last breath. Bankim's family was a family of Deputy Magistrates- his father, and all his brothers were Deputy Magistrates, and so was he to become one in the future as the position of Deputy Magistrate was the highest position available to Indians in that age.

Bankim started his English education at Midnapore, in 1844. Highly gifted from a young age, he used to read voraciously, and spend all his time in the school library. In 1856, at Hooghly College, Presidency College, Calcutta, and the University of Calcutta, of which he was one of the first graduates. He was soon appointed as a deputy magistrate in the Indian civil service in 1858. An extremely able and independent administrator; he dealt with wicked indigo planters, handled various cases, and provided good relief in cyclone ravaged areas. He retired because of failing health in 1891, four years prior to his demise at a relatively young age of 56, on April 8, 1894.¹

Bankim is famous as a novelist, scholar, poet, essayist, philosopher, lawyer, critic, official, philologist and above all a religious innovator. Bankim wrote conscientiously and competently many insightful essays on a variety of topics - history, sociology, religion, archaeology, literature and even science. He penned “*Bande Mataram*” (1857), and “*Anandamath*” (1882)- the novel which contains that dazzling ballad of patriotism. His 1882 novel ‘*Anandamath*’ is regarded as one of the most significant books in the history of Bengali as well as Indian literature. The novel became so popular that it was translated into several different languages.

The 'Abbey of Bliss' by Nares Chandra Sen-Gupta was the first English translation of the same. Besides this work, he wrote many other works of importance such as *Raj Sinha*, *Durgeshnandini*, *Mrinalini*, *Chandrasekhar*, *Sita Ram*, *Devi Chaudharani*, *Kapalakundala*, *Bish Briksha*, *Krishnakanter Will*, *Rajani and Indira*, *Kamalakanter Daptar*. Bankim also established the high-quality Bengali journal called *Bangadarshan*, in 1872. The purpose of the journal was to make it at once a mouthpiece of the intelligentsia, and a carrier of knowledge to the people, in general; through their mother tongue.²

Towards the last quarter of his life, Bankim turned his mind increasingly away from art and fiction, and deemed the study, investigation and promotion of Hindu religion. Even in early time of his life, he was equally against the proselytizing work of foreign powers and used his writings, government position, and literary talents to promote hatred against those who were non-Hindus, especially Muslims. Bankim wrote two important books- *Krishnacharitra* (Life of Shri Krishna) and *Dharmatattva-Anushilan* (The Principles of Dharma). He has also left behind an incomplete commentary on the holy Gita. However, his book *Anandmath* and the hymn *Bande Mataram* (Hail to thee, Mother) included in this book was more against the Muslims. It is important to note that this hymn, composed originally in 1857 but added to the book *Anandmath* in 1882 when the book was finally written and published.

Hindu Revivalism and Fictionalizing the Historical Context

Bankim Chandra Chattopdhyay takes his worthy position as a formidable giant in the Hindu revivalist stream. He wrote *Anandamath* (Abbey of Bliss) in highly Sanskritised Bengali. In this book he infused 'mother cult' (personifying Bengal as a mother goddess) and portrayed the only other outsiders, Muslim rulers, as enemies. The novel intricately weaves together the fervour of Indian nationalism with spiritual asceticism. It unfolds during the late 18th-century Sanyasi Rebellion and follows the *Santaans*, a group of warrior monks. Its inclusion of "Bande Mataram," a hymn to the motherland, further emphasizes its lasting impact on the Indian independence movement.

Anandamath (1882) is based on the Sanyasi rebellion (1770-77) against Mir Jafar, the ruler of Bengal, and the British tax collectors. According to the novel, besides, the British rule had limited political powers at that time; the British were only tax collectors under the rule of the Muslim Nawab, Mir Jafar. However, factually it is also notable that Mir Jafar who had, in fact, died in 1765 is presented in the novel as the Nawab of Bengal during the famine of the 1770s. It was the Dual Government (1765-72) in Bengal after the battle of Buxar. Under this system, the Diwani rights (collection and management of revenue) were held under British East India Company and Faujdari or administrative responsibilities were held by the Muslim puppet ruler Mir Jafar. This system reduced the people of Bengal in the state of distress and calamity. Bankim narrates that in 1770 Bengal had not yet fallen under British sway. The British at the time were Bengal's tax collectors. All they did was collect the revenue; they took no responsibility for life and property of Bengalis. Their task was to collect the money, while the responsibility for life and property belonged to the evil Mir Jafar, a vile, treacherous blot on the human race.³

The history within the novel presents (rather constructs) a period of independent Nawabs of Bengal, free from any direct interference from the British in the socio-political affairs of the province. The portrayal of the British being politically inactive in the 1770s does not fit in the frame of the academic history of Bengal. From 1765, in fact, the East India Company was effectively in control of Bengal, being the power that appointed the Nawab and his ministers, a fact that Bankim with his strong historical sense must have known. The British were granted the right to collect tax in Bihar, Orissa and Oudh in addition to Bengal by 1772. The granting of the Diwani to

the company was to become the legal foundation for British rule in Bengal. Thus, the British were not only tax collectors but also a strong and fast-spreading foreign power in the Indian subcontinent.⁴

The story of *Anandamath* begins with the backdrop of the Bengal famine of 1770, a time of severe distress and suffering for the people of Bengal. The terrible famine that occurred in Bengal in 1770 and its aftermath provides a socio-economic backdrop to the confrontation. The low-caste and those who lived in the forests started to eat dogs, mice, and cats. Those who ran away to unknown parts died of starvation there and those who did not flee died of disease, either because they ate the uneatable, or for want of eating at all.⁵ The famine is estimated to have caused the deaths of 10 million people (one out of three, reducing the population to thirty million in the then Bengal). The natural catastrophe did not soften the Company to lower its revenue demand. The Company's administration is known to have collected nearly as much revenue in the following year (1771-72) as it did during the year preceding the famine.⁶

The nationalist sentiment which is vividly depicted in the novel, did not actually exist at all among the Sanyasis of the then Bengal. Despite the fact that Indian nationalism was a later phenomenon in reality, the novelist has purposefully constructed the idea of active nationalism during the famine of the 1770s. The novel cannot be easily situated in the Indian history of nationalism, as it does not simply represent but rather construct an alternative history of Indian nationalism. Chakraborty calls *Anandamath* "a foundational text for the understanding of Indian nationalism" and "a representative text"; he writes, "*Anandamath* is a good exemplar for showing how representation is constructed and authorized within specific socio-cultural contexts and patronages".⁷

Anandamath portrays the Muslims in dark colors; it seems to promote communal hatred and violence, as it romanticizes brutal attacks on the Muslims by the Sanyasis. The novelist holds the Muslim ruler responsible for the misfortune of the Vaishnavs, and the Muslim ruler, who is a concrete individual, is expanded into an entire community. The agent of the famine is shown as the Muslims, whereas the victims are identified with the Hindus. The Muslims are presented as foes to mislead and distract the British and to present Hindu nationalism in action. In the novel, the healer, who presents the British as friends, describes the Muslims as the foes of the motherland. It is important to point up that in the actual 'rebellion', both Hindu Sanyasis and Muslim Fakirs fought against the British East India Company. Bankim as an employee serving under the British rule must have realized that history would ultimately reveal that the Muslims had actively participated in the 'rebellion' as allies, not foes. He took a fair amount of poetic license to portray them in dark colors to conceal his real political agenda.

In *Anandamath*, Bankim fused for the first time a revived Hindu religious fervor with a newfound nationalistic zeal, since he wanted to create a new myth of valor for Bengal in order to shake the people out of their somnolence. He has tried to create the "fabulative history" or "imagined history" in the form of a tale of valour and self-assertion in the historical setting of Bengal. But it carries postmodern overtones, as it deconstructs and de-historicizes history by fictionalizing the historical context; it problematizes and interrogates the traditionally assumed authority of the historical data. In other words, *Anandamath* falls under the category of those historical novels which are based on the premise that it is impossible to know exactly what. Thus, the nationalist sentiment which is vividly depicted in the novel, did not actually exist at all among the Sanyasis of the then Bengal. Despite the fact that Indian nationalism was a later phenomenon in reality, the novelist has purposefully constructed the idea of active nationalism during the famine of the 1770s. The novel cannot be easily situated in the Indian history of nationalism, as it does not simply represent but rather construct an alternative history of Indian nationalism.

Anandamath and Muslim Myth

The story begins with an introduction to a couple named Mahendra and Kalyani who were trapped in the famine-stricken small village of Padachin. Amidst the famine, Mahendra leaves the village for food and safety for his family. As they traverse the treacherous landscape, they are attacked by bandits, leading to their separation. Mahendra manages to escape while Kalyani and their daughter are left behind. Many of the people turned violent against the government, left their families and turned themselves as Sanyasi-cum-dacoit. Mahendra, in his quest to find his family, stumbles upon a secretive group of ascetics, known as the *Santaans*, (child of the motherland) under Satyanand. It was their duty to murder the Sepoys and local police and frequently looting the government treasury.⁸

Mahendra is taken to their hidden monastery, Anandamath, where he is introduced to their cause and ideology. *The Santaans* believe in India's spiritual and moral rejuvenation through armed struggle against the Muslim rulers. Mahendra, inspired by their dedication and patriotism, joins their ranks. Meanwhile, Kalyani, after a harrowing journey, finds refuge in a forest where the *Santaans* eventually discover her. She is taken to Anandamath and reunited with Mahendra. Satyananda rallies his followers with the stirring hymn "Bande Mataram," which effectively invokes their love for the motherland. By providing Mahendra with insights into how our country was before the British arrived, and how the Muslims have threatened the existence of a Hindu kingdom, Satyanand stirs up feelings of nationalism in him at the Ashram. The religious and cultural revivals became intertwined. Some believed that only the revival of Hindu culture could bring about India's renewal. Bhavanand is discussing with another character Mahendra after looting the government treasury. They sing the song *Bande Mataram* and discussed the current situations. But the climax of the discussion is that Bhavanand praises the Englishmen as brave and dutiful and Muslims as lazy, coward and corrupt.⁹

Bankim Chandra is fully aware that the greedy British were responsible for the sufferings in Bengal but his Hindu tinge compels him to write the Mir Jafar as the main culprit. The character Bhavanand says, "Whether we are safe in our country under Muslim king? Our religion, caste, self-respect, all has gone; now it's the time to bet of life. How the Hindus will remain Hindus without ousting to these addicted (*Nasheri*) beard men (Muslims)?" Bhavanand also says that he will kill and oust them. He also gives the example of Plassey that how a handful of Britishers defeated a huge army of Muslims. Bhavanand says to Mahendra that they are now Sanyasi and after achieving their goal (ousting the Muslims), they will again return to their family and become a householder. Their conversation continues while singing the *Bande Mataram*.¹⁰

Bankim Chandra writes that the Sanyasis rose against the Muslim rulers and the subjects, stormed upon the Nawab's army and burnt the Muslim villages. At last Warren Hastings became the Governor-General of Bengal and deputed Captain Thomas to crush the Sanyasi rebellion but met a heavy loss. In a battle the Sanyasis and their leader Bhavanand caught Captain Thomas and told, "you are not our enemy, why you came to help the Muslims? I pardon your life but now you will remain as a prisoner. Long live Englishmen! You are our friend".¹¹

Bankim Chandra further writes that somehow the differences again arose and Captain Thomas was shot dead and his army routed. One of the characters of the novel Satyanand declared that "Hindu Raj" established. All enchanted "*Bande Mataram*" and "*Jai Jagdish Hare*". They caught the village-men and travellers and said, "Chant *Bande Mataram* otherwise I will kill you." Every Sanyasi looted the market and houses. All were yelling, "Muslims are defeated, the country is ours, brothers! Say Hari, Hari." The Muslims of the villages were beaten and ran away. Many Muslims shaved their beards and repeated Rama, Rama, and told that they were

Hindus when asked. Bankim Chandra further writes that the Muslims asked, “whether the Quraan is a lie, what we gained after offering five times prayer when Hindus became victorious? All is a lie”.¹²

Bankim Chandra used the *Nyarhe* (or circumcised) and *Jaban* (a derogatory term) for Muslims. Bankim is regarded by most Hindutvadis as the grandpa of Hindutva and propagator of the ideology of Hindu supremacism. Ahmed Sofa (1943–2001), a legendary public intellectual in Bangladesh, none influenced Bengal’s society and politics as much as Bankim did, and the influence of Anandamath in Bengal’s socio-political life is comparable only to that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract in France. Sofa wrote, ‘He was the first to dream of establishing a Hindu Rashtra’, and added, ‘If a single person is to be blamed for the Partition of Bengal, it is Bankim Chandra’. Jinnah, in a speech made on April 23, 1943, said: ‘I think you will bear me out that when we passed the 1940 Lahore Resolution, we had not used the word ‘Pakistan.’ Who gave us this word? The Hindus fathered this word on us ...’¹³

In the whole novel, Bankim Chandra looks more sympathetic to the Britishers and shows his utmost hate against the Muslims. The novel of Bankim Chandra became so popular and, undoubtedly, the first written record of Hindu hatred against the Muslims, which shown the seeds of communalism in Indian secular atmosphere. Bankim Chandra was perhaps aware that under the Diwani system or the British rule during the first Governor Generalship of Warren Hastings, the real rulers were Englishmen not the Muslims and the misery and suffering in Bengal were also because of the Englishmen, yet he the whole novel was written against the Muslims.

Bankim Chandra, after more than a hundred years after that event, was sure that English men have fully captured all over India and enslaved the Indian people including Bankim Chandra himself. Then why he could not truly speak against the tyrant British rule. There are a lot of questions about this novel. Was Bankim Chandra a pro-British? Whether he was not favouring the freedom movement against the British? When the rulers were the British and undoubtedly a cruel tyrant and enslaved the motherland, why he wrote anti-Muslim book at a time when Hindu-Muslim unity was needed to fight against the British? Naturally, all the above questions are unanswered and hoped these will remain unanswered.

Anandamath has received a lot of criticism on multiple fronts. Many people view it as an anti-Muslim novel; many others criticize it as a political novel which promotes colonialism; several critics call it an artistic failure. However, it also might not be ignored that Bankim Chandra does not castigate the British in the novel due to his professional constraints. On the other hand, he appears to be a virulent critic of the Muslims. His criticism against the Muslims is a clever maneuver to facilitate the presentation of his Hindu nationalist agenda in the novel. The actual message of the novel is not made explicit in the story; it is deeply rooted in the socio-political contexts that influenced the writer and his work in one way or another.

Conclusions: In conclusion, “Anandamath” by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is a multifaceted novel that explores themes of patriotism, spiritual nationalism, sacrifice, colonial oppression, and the role of women in the freedom struggle. The novel vividly depicts the hardships faced by the Indian populace. The Bengal famine of 1770, caused by exploitative colonial policies and exacerbated by administrative negligence, is a backdrop to the story. The economic exploitation and the devastating Bengal famine of 1770 exacerbated the suffering of the Indian masses, fueling resistance movements. The novel blends religious devotion with the political struggle for freedom, portraying the fight against colonial rule as a spiritual mission. The *Santaans* view their revolt as a political endeavour and a sacred duty ordained by divine will. This fusion of spirituality and nationalism is evident in the character of Satyananda, who is both a religious leader and a revolutionary. The ascetic lifestyle of the *Santaans*, their renunciation of worldly pleasures, and their commitment to the motherland highlight the

idea that true freedom can only be achieved through moral and spiritual purification. The Hindu missionary movement and the militant movement in Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century both benefited greatly from its huge impetus for diverse religious, patriotic, and national activities.

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3. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (2005 Translated by Julius J. Lipner). *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood*, Oxford University Publication, p. 140.
4. The Commander-in-Chief of his army, Mir Jafar, betrayed Siraj-ud-daula in the battle of Plassey in 1757. With the support of the Company, Mir Jafar proclaimed himself the Nawab of Bengal. Siraj-ud-daula was captured and put to death. When Jafar failed to satisfy heavy demands for money from the Company, he had to give the place to his son-in-law, Mir Kasim, who was a nominee of the Company, in 1760. Jafar preferred to reside at Calcutta on a pension of Rs. 1,500 p.m. grudgingly sanctioned by the new Nawab, Kasim. And when Kasim and the English did not gel with each other, Kasim was defeated in the battle of Buxor (1764). Later, Clive, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the British possessions in Bengal, came forward with the dual system whereby the Company acquired real power while the responsibility for administration rested on the shoulders of the Nawab of Bengal.
5. *The Sacred Brotherhood, op. cit.* pp. 131-132. (The people suffered, but the king extracted taxes to the full. And because they had to pay their taxes in full, the poor ate but once a day...Once again people went hungry...Then Muhammad Reza Khan, the king's revenue officer, thinking to show how important he was, at once increased taxes by 10 percent, and great was the lament in Bengal.)
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